

## Understanding the Word

Acts 8:26-40

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I remember the first time I questioned whether I was good enough to be a minister. I was at a conference right after I graduated from seminary. I was surrounded by colleagues who were much more talented than me, listening to speakers who were much more faithful than me, telling me to do things in ministry that I would never have the wisdom or courage to do. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever thought that at any moment, someone may throw open the church door, point a finger in your direction, and say, "What are YOU doing here? Don't you know this place is only for people who have it all figured out?"

So that night, I decided to read a book I thought might help me. It was the book of Acts. Acts tells the story of the birth of the church. It's our story, really. It's about how the disciples, a group of rag-tag scaredy cats who thought they weren't good enough, and probably weren't, are transformed into a movement that spreads the good news of Jesus Christ into an unbelieving world. It's about how God's Spirit is poured out on them in tongues of flame on the day of Pentecost, and even Peter, the guy who denied knowing Jesus three times, becomes ignited to share God's word. Acts is also about the peculiar ways God works in our lives, and I think this is where I most connected with Acts that night at the conference. The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian was especially helpful to me because it reminded me of some basic but very important tenets of being a person seeking to follow Christ.

In my time of doubting whether I was good enough to be a Christian, the first thing this story told me was that God believes in us enough to call us to the strangest of places. We don't know what Phillip was doing before the angel of the Lord spoke to him. We find out later in Acts that Phillip had four daughters, so he was probably waiting in line for the bathroom or fretting over the latest boyfriend. We don't know what he was doing, but we do know what he was called to do. Drop what you're doing and go take a walk on a desert road at high noon.

You just never know what God is going to call you to do, do you? Abraham is minding his own business and gets called to move. Moses is tending his sheep and gets called to Egypt. The disciples are busy casting their nets in the sea when Jesus says, "Follow me." I was working as a youth minister and preparing to start a doctoral degree when this idea of seminary popped up. You never know when God is going to call you or where God is going to put you.

I've been called to some pretty strange places with some very interesting people. Lincolnshire, Illinois, comes to mind. I've also been called to some scary places. Hospital rooms. Funeral homes. Talk about desert roads, paths that lead through the wilderness. Have you ever been called to go somewhere you didn't want to go? Maybe to a doctor's office. To the bedside of a friend or family member. Even to church, where you have been called to serve and you're just not sure if you're good enough for the job.

I wonder how Phillip felt when he got this call. "Me? There? Now?" But we don't hear any grumbling or complaining. Phillip is called by God and goes. As I read Phillip's story that night at the conference, it reminded me that God doesn't have part-timers. There are no stories in the Bible of disciples who worked during the week and then followed Jesus on the weekends. Whether we think we're good enough or not, our call to be Christians is a full-time call.

So Phillip goes and on the way meets this Ethiopian eunuch, an official in the court of the Queen. You just never know who God is going to put in your path, do you? This Ethiopian has a

serious problem, and Phillip is just the man to help him with it. This is another part of the story that was comforting to me that night at the ministry conference. I had read a lot of things in the Bible that made sense, but I had read a whole lot more in there that I didn't understand. And now I was being called to be the one who stands up on Sunday morning and explains it to other people? Me? There? Now?

When I was in high school a Christian friend of mine gave me my first Bible. This is it. It has a gray cover, my name embossed on the front. The day she gave it to me, I decided I was going to read it. It's the King James version, which is of course the original language of the Bible. Everybody should read the Bible at least once, right? So that night I propped up a few pillows, got a tall glass of water and set to work. Things started out well. Genesis is a firecracker of a book, lots of sex and violence and other stuff that, as a teenager, held my attention. Exodus was pretty cool, some good special effects with the plagues and Moses parting the sea. I made it about halfway through Exodus. And then came these strange laws and obscure instructions. The Ten Commandments were OK, although at the time I questioned that "honor thy father and mother" part. But then I got to things like, "All fowls that creep, going upon all four, shall be an abomination unto you. Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth. Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind. But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination unto you." I remember thinking two things: "Who eats bald locusts?" and then "I wonder what's on TV." That was the end of my first attempt to read the Bible.

What I learned from that experience, and what the Ethiopian confirms for us, is that sometimes the Bible is hard to understand. If it were easy to understand, we'd all know exactly what to believe, wouldn't we? The reason we have all these denominations is that one person reads the Bible and says, "It obviously means this" and another person reads it and says, "I beg to differ, I think it means this" and then the first person says, "No it doesn't, you idiot" and before you know it fingers are being pointed and punches are being thrown and then I have to step in between Michael and Nelson to separate them.

The Bible is not easy to understand and trying to understand it can make us feel like we're not good enough. If the Bible is meant to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, as Psalm 119 says, then at times it can be illuminating, but at other times it's blinding. Sometimes scripture is like a rock in your shoe, irritating you until you decide to give it some attention. During my first failed reading attempt I didn't even make it to the prophets, and that's probably a good thing, because they would have scared me half to death. The verses the Ethiopian quotes in this passage are from Isaiah, who talks about slaughtered sheep and sheared lambs and humiliation and deprivation. The eunuch was confused. I would be, too. And when the Bible confuses us, we have two choices.

We can do what I did when I first tried to read the Bible. We can give up. We can say, "This is too hard! I don't get it. I wonder what's on TV." And that's an understandable response. But here's the danger with that approach. If we don't figure out for ourselves what the Bible says, then we have to rely on someone else to do it for us. If you surrender your own desire to understand, then the only way you'll gain knowledge is through someone else's lens of interpretation, and there are a lot of voices out there who are more than happy to tell you what you should believe. Turn on just about any news program or talk radio show and folks will be glad to tell you what God really thinks about our president or immigrants or human sexuality or global warming. Do we really want to let someone else decide for us what to believe?

The other option is to do what the Ethiopian did. He read, and when he didn't understand, he asked questions. He didn't say to Phillip, "Just tell me what to believe." He said, "Help me understand what this means." He consulted a knowledgeable source who gave him the tools to interpret the Bible for himself. He didn't give up, but stuck with the scripture, even when he didn't understand it, until God shed some light on the meaning of it. I believe the Ethiopian was one of the spiritual forefathers of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I say that because one of our principles of identity is that we hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom - and the responsibility - to study God's Word within the community of the church. We believe scripture speaks to each one of us, but it may say one thing to you and another thing to me, depending on our life experiences and current struggles and questions. I'll never stand up here and tell you what to believe, because I believe you have a brain and would like to determine that for yourself.

In order to do that, the Ethiopian had to move beyond a surface reading by consulting Phillip. We have those same types of resources available to us today. You may not have Phillip walking around, but you have pastors and teachers who are willing to sit down with you and help you ask your questions. I don't know if you've heard of this Gutenberg guy, but his printing press is pretty cool. Because of that, we also have resources like study bibles, bible dictionaries and commentaries which can help us delve into the Word of God and go beyond the sometimes perplexing surface. I believe a good study bible is the best tool we can have as Christians. If you need a recommendation for one, just ask me.

It's important to note what might happen if you dare to read the Bible for yourself. After Phillip shares the Good News of Jesus with the Ethiopian, the Ethiopian is moved to respond by asking to be baptized. That's the thing about God's word. If you are truly paying attention, you can't just hear it or read it and then not react. If the Bible puts a rock in our shoe, we have to do something about it. My friend David Shirey says not all scripture calls for the same response. Sometimes it calls for thanksgiving or apology, praise or sacrifice, a change of mind or a change of heart, moving us to say or do something or to stop saying or doing something. The Bible calls for all kinds of different responses, but it always calls for a response.

For me, initially, that response was, "Huh?" Then it became, "Me? Here? Now?" And after spending time with scripture, seeking to understand it, asking questions, allowing myself to be confused and convicted, encouraged and uplifted, my response has become, "Here I am, Lord. Here I am." You've heard the Word. What's your response?